

The moment of decision

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As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

- Mark 10:17-31

In his 1956 essay titled *Purity of Heart*, the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard explored the premise: "I am; therefore I must decide." Kierkegaard argued that what makes human beings spiritual beings is not only our capacity to decide but the imperative that we decide.

Will I take the job – or not?

Will I have the baby – or not?

Will I help my neighbor in need – or not?

Will I keep pursuing the dream – or not?

And, ultimately, for Kierkegaard and all Christians:

How will I understand and respond to God – or not?

Our decisions define us, haunt us and test us. Our decisions make or break us. Our decisions result in lasting shame and regret, or enduring pride and gratitude.

I am; therefore I must decide.

Jesus of Nazareth had a knack for locating and exposing the decisions of utmost importance in others. "Follow me," he said to some fishermen who were mending their nets on a seashore. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." We imagine that this was the first and only time that Jesus had issued that summons. But what if he had been going up and down the beach, approaching and challenging others, for days, weeks? Some had shrugged, pretended they hadn't heard; some laughed; some cursed; none followed, until he came to those we now know by name, those who decided in an instant to leave everything they knew and to follow. (Matthew 4:18-22)

And then there was the decision that Jesus elicited from a man at the Pool of Beth-zatha in Jerusalem. The man had been paralyzed for 37 years. Over time, his entire identity had become defined by his illness, so much so that Jesus has to confront him, "Do you want to be healed?"

Or: *Do you want to be healed ... or not?* (John 5:2-9)

Again, in today's gospel, Jesus peers into a person's heart and calls for a decision. The man came to Jesus voluntarily, and he does seem to have been wanting a spiritual examination: "*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" The exam begins promisingly. The man can assure Jesus that he has refrained from murder, adultery, stealing and lying.

But then, Jesus sees and diagnoses a spiritual tumor. To honestly answer the man's quest for eternal life, the threat must be addressed, and a decision made. *'You lack one thing, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'*

I am, therefore I must decide.

Notice that before issuing the diagnosis, we are told that, *'Jesus, looking at him, loved him.'* Out of love, Jesus tells the man what he'd rather not hear. Out of love, Jesus describes the decision that this man must make to find what he says he is looking for: *'to inherit eternal life.'* I wonder how I often you or I recognize that our highest and truest aspirations and our most difficult decisions are preceded and continuously held in that same love: *'Jesus, looking at him, loved him.'* So also in your quest and quandaries and decisions: Jesus looks at you, knows you, loves you.

We often lose our connection to this love in the turbulence of our momentous decisions – as was the case with the man in today's story. "*When he heard [Jesus, the man] was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*" In the translation we heard, the first of the two Greek words used to describe the man's reaction to Jesus is 'shocked.' Other translations say that 'the man's face fell,' or that he was 'saddened,' 'disheartened,' 'deeply dismayed,' 'stunned' or 'gloomy.'

The same Greek word was often used to describe bad weather. Sometimes the coming of an unexpected and momentous decision can feel like a storm squall coming out of nowhere. Or the squall may overcome us by way of the chorus of other voices: the conventions of our culture, the *shoulds* of our families or friends or churches. In the context of our imperative of deciding, Kierkegaard described these choruses as *'a play of confused forces ... a swarm of insects ... [and] the noise of many at a distance [seeming] to the ear like a single voice.'*

I am; therefore I must decide.

One decision I had to make today was whether or not I might use today's gospel to talk about our financial giving at Ascension, a ministry that is on our near horizon. There are good reasons for me to go there. Our giving to the church is of value to our individual faith and important to the parish's well-being. Many if not all of us are implicated in our attachments to and the spiritual deceits of money. And today's gospel passage continues with the lengthiest discourse on money by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Despite these opportunities, I decided not to go there, for now.

Before it's about money, today's gospel story is about a one-on-one encounter with Jesus. It's about religious questions and appearances and motives. And it's about decisions. I credit the rich man with asking Jesus a question of ultimate value: *'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'* How does that question sit with you? If you were to ask the same of Jesus, how might he see into you and respond to you? Might he point to some particular cross with your name on it? Might he name what you must let go of in order to pick up that cross and follow, in order for you to inherit eternal life? What will you decide? Amen.